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## OUR NEED OF THE CLASSICS<sup>1</sup>

BY JOHN FINLEY

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In a book on *Roman Farm Management* containing translations of Cato and Varro by a "Virginia Farmer" (who happens also to be an American railroad president), there is quoted in the original Latin a proverb whose practice not only gave basis for the proud phrase *Romanus sum* but also helped to make the Romans "a people of enduring achievement." It is *Romanus sedendo vincit*. For, as this new-world farmer adds by way of translation and emphasis, "The Romans achieved their results by thoroughness and patience." "It was thus," he continues, "they defeated Hannibal, and it was thus that they built their farmhouses and fences, cultivated their fields, their vineyards and their oliveyards, and bred and fed their livestock. They seemed to have realized that there are no shortcuts in the processes of nature and that the law of compensations is invariable." "The foundation of their agriculture," he asserts, "was the *fallow*"; and concludes, commenting upon this, that while "one can find instruction in their practice even today, one can benefit even more from their agricultural philosophy, for the characteristic of the American farmer is that he is in too much of a hurry."

This is only by way of preface to saying that the need in our educational philosophy, or, at any rate, in our educational practice, as in agriculture, is the need of the *fallow*.

It will be known to philologists, even to those who have no agricultural knowledge, that the "fallow field" is not an idle field, though that is the popular notion. "Fallow" as a noun meant originally a "harrow," and as a verb, "to plough," "to harrow." "A fallow field is a field ploughed and tilled," but left unsown for a time as to the main crop of its productivity; or, in better modern

<sup>1</sup> An address given at the National Classical Conference in Milwaukee, July 3, 1919.

practice, I believe, sown to a crop valuable not for what it will bring in the market (for it may be utterly unsalable), but for what it will give to the soil in enriching it for its higher and longer productivity.

I employ this agricultural metaphor not in ignorance; for I have, out on these very prairies, read between corn-husking and the spring ploughing Virgil's *Georgics* and *Bucolics*, for which Varro's treatises furnished the foundations. And I have also, on these same prairies, carried Horace's *Odes*, in the spring, to the field with me, strapping the book to the plough to read while the horses rested at the furrow's end.

Nor do I employ this metaphor demeaningly. Nothing has so glorified for me my youthful days on these prairies as the associations which the classics, including the Bible, gave to them on the farm; and also in the shop, I may add, for it was in the shop as well as on the farm that I had their companionship. When learning the printer's trade, while a college student, I set up in small pica my translation of the daily allotment of the "Prometheus Bound" of Aeschylus, and that dark and dingy old shop became the world of the Titan who "manward sent Art's mighty means and perfect rudiment," the place where the divine in man "defied the invincible gesture of necessity." And nothing can so glorify the classics as to bring them into the field and into the shop and let them become woven into the tasks that might else seem menial.

In a recent editorial in the *New York Times* it was said that the events of which Aristophanes wrote were more modern than the days of the administration of Rutherford B. Hayes. But this was simply because Aristophanes immortally portrayed the undying things in human nature, whereas the issues associated with this particular administration were evanescent. The immortal is, of course, always modern, and the classic is the immortal, the timeless distillation of human experience.

But I wander from my thesis, which is that the classics are needed as the *fallow* to give lasting and increasing fertility to the natural mind out upon democracy's great prairie-levels, into which so much has been washed down and laid down from the regal mountains and hills of the long past.

In the war days we naturally ignored the *fallow*. We cultivated with Hooverian haste. It was necessary to put our soil in peril of exhaustion even as we put our men in peril of death. Forty million added acres were commandeered; six billions of bushels of the leading cereals were added to the annual product of earlier seasons. The land could be let to think only of immediate defense. Crops only could be grown which would help promptly to win the war. Vetch and clover and all else that permanently enriched must be given up for war gardening or war farming. The motto was not *Americanus sedendo vincit* but *Americanus accelerando vincit*.

But on this day of my writing (the day of the signing of the peace treaty) I am thinking that in agriculture, and in education as well, we must again turn our thoughts to the virtues of thoroughness and patience—the virtues of the *fallow*, that is, to ploughing and harrowing and tilling, *not* for the immediate crop, but for the enrichment of the soil and of the mind, according as our thought is of agriculture or education.

Cato, when asked what the first principle of good agriculture was, answered, "To plough well"; when asked what the second was, replied, "To plough again"; and when asked what the third was, said, "To apply fertilizer." And a later Latin writer speaks of the farmer who does not plough thoroughly as one who becomes "a mere clodhopper." You will notice that it is not sowing, nor hoeing after the sowing, but ploughing that is the basic operation.

It is the sowing, however, that is popularly put first in our agricultural and educational theory. "A sower went forth to sow." A teacher went forth to teach, that is, to scatter information, facts—arithmetical, historical, geographical, linguistic facts. But the emphasis of the greatest agricultural parable in our literature was after all not on the sowing but on the soil, on that upon which or into which the seed fell—or, as it might be better expressed, upon the *fallow*. It was only the fallow ground, the ground that had been properly cleared of stones, thorns, and other shallowing or choking encumbrances, that gave point to the parable. It was the same seed that fell upon the stony, thorny, and fallow ground alike.

There is a time to sow, to sow the seed for the special crop you want; but it is after you have ploughed the field. There is a time to specialize, to give the information which the life is to produce in kind; but it is when you have thoroughly prepared the mind by its ploughing disciplines.

I have lately seen the type of agriculture practised out in the fields that were the scriptural cradle of the race. There the ploughing is but the scratching of the surface. Indeed, the sowing is on the top of the ground and the so-called ploughing or scratching in with a crooked stick comes after. Contrast this with the deep ploughing of the West, and we have one explanation at least of the greater productivity of the West. And there is the educational analogue here as well. In those homelands of the race the seed of the mind is sown on the surface and is scratched in by oral repetitions. The mind that receives it is not ploughed, is not trained to think. It merely receives and with shallow root (if it be not scorched), gives back its meager crop.

There must be ploughing before the sowing, and deep ploughing, if things with root are to find abundant life and fruit. And the classics, to my thought, furnish the best ploughs for the mind—at any rate for minds that have depth of soil. For shallow minds, “where there is not much depth of earth,” where, because there cannot be much root, that which springs up withers away, it were perhaps not worth while to risk this precious implement. And then, too, there are geniuses whose fertility needs not the same stirring disciplines. There are also other ploughs, but as a ploughman I have found none better for English use than the plough which has the classical name, the plough which reaches the subsoil and which supplements the furrowing ploughs in bringing to the culture of our youthful minds that which lies deep in the experience of the race.

There are many kinds of fallow, as I have already intimated. The more modern is not the “bare fallow” which lets the land so ploughed and harrowed lie unsown even for a season, but the fallow, of varied name, where the land is sown to crops whose purpose is to gather the free nitrogen back into the ground for its enrichment. So is our fallowing by the classics not only to prepare the ground,

clear it of weeds, aerate it, break up the clods, but also to enrich it by bringing back into the mind of the youth of today that which has escaped into the air of the ages past, through the great human minds that have lived and loved upon this earth and laid themselves down into its dust to die.

In New York City a young man, born out upon the prairies, was lying, as it was thought, near to death in a hospital. He turned to the nurse and asked what month it was. She answered that it was early May. He thought of the prairies, glorified to him by Horace's *Odes*. He heard the frogs in the swales amid the virgin prairie flowers as Aristophanes had heard them in the ponds of Greece. He saw the springing oats in a neighboring field that should furnish the pipes for the winds of Pan. He saw, as the dying poet, Ibycus, the cranes go honking overhead. And he said, "I can't die now. It's ploughing time."

It is "ploughing time" for the world again, and ploughing time not only because we turn from instruments of war to those of peace, symbolized since the days of Isaiah by the "ploughshares" beaten from swords, but because we must turn to the cultivation with thoroughness and patience, not only of our acres, but of the minds that are alike to have world-horizons in this new era of the earth.

Amos prophesied that in the day of restoration "the ploughman would overtake the reaper." War's grim reaper is quitting the field today. The ploughman has overtaken him. May he remember the law of the "*fallow*" and not be in too great a hurry.